

## AFTER THE THIRD BATTLE OF THE SOMME

German Retreat to Hindenburg Line  
Will Mean a Deliberate Refusal  
of Battle, a Resignation of the  
Offensive, in Order to Avoid  
Defeat and Prolong War

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The active phase of the Third Battle of the Somme was over on Monday, August 12, when the British fourth army was halted on approximately the line of the old Somme front of July 1, 1916, the front facing Chaumes and Roye from which Foch had launched Fayolle's army at the beginning of the first battle of the Somme. Thirty thousand prisoners and seven hundred and fifty cannon captured, the Paris-Amiens-Boulogne railway cleared, the Montdidier salient pinched out—these were the immediate fruits of the first Allied offensive in the campaign of 1918, which in itself demonstrated that the initiative had passed from Ludendorff to the Allied commander in chief.

#### The Parallel With the Marne

In the following week there was a slow but marked forward movement south of Chaumes as Debeny's first army, Humbert's third army, and finally the French tenth army beyond the Oise moved up in line and in turn reoccupied the old position of July, 1916. At the moment when this article is written, on Monday, August 19, the line from the Somme to the Aisne, from Soissons to Chaumes, coincides almost exactly with the familiar line of two years ago, and the changes that have taken place in the past week are the logical consequences of the initial victory on August 8 and the following three days.

The parallel with the events at the Marne is exact: all that happened after July 19, when Mangin's thrust above Soissons was checked, was the natural and inevitable consequence of the initial gain; the Germans had to retire to the Vesle between Soissons and Rheims, because Mangin's thrust had rendered the intervening country untenable; in the same fashion, Hutier and Marwitz were compelled to retire along their entire front because of the successes of the British south of the Somme and toward Chaumes. In the same way, because the German flanks along the Oise and the Somme held, the British advance was obliged to halt as the Allied advance in the Marne salient had been compelled to halt because of the success of Boehn in defending the flanking positions about Soissons and north of Rheims.

#### Lesson of the Hindenburg Retreat

Although the German lines have thus temporarily stabilized themselves on the old Somme front line there have continued rumors of a retirement by the Germans on a wide front, rumors which persist and raise once more the question of a future withdrawal of the Germans to the Hindenburg line with a possible intermediate stop on the line of the upper Somme, precisely as there continues the belief that the Germans at the Vesle will ultimately go back behind the Aisne and reoccupy the old Chemin-des-Dames position. On the military side the significance of such retirements would be simple and the reversion to the strategy of 1917 unmistakable.

The great Hindenburg retreat of 1917 was very little understood at the time and was hailed as a proof of approaching German defeat and expulsion from France. It was nothing of the sort. Germany had still a Russian problem on her hands, and she believed that one more campaign would suffice to abolish the Eastern front. The experiences of the Somme had taught her the enormous costs of a defensive campaign of pounding, costs which she could not well afford to pay.

#### Labors of Allies Made Useless

Accordingly Hindenburg resolved to decline a renewal of the Battle of the Somme, for which the French and British had made enormous preparations, withdraw his whole line between Arras and Soissons, and by devastating the Picardy and Artois regions before his new

position delay the British and French approach to the new front, render useless all the vast labors of the Allies in preparing the ground for a continuation of the Somme offensive and avoid any serious fighting on these sectors for the year.

#### A Successful Manoeuvre

Hindenburg's reasoning was in substance this: "I cannot afford the men for another Somme battle this year and the enemy is preparing to resume the struggle. But if I retire twenty miles to good positions it will take him all summer to arrive before the new positions with his communications, heavy artillery and other machinery. He will not be able to attack the new line this year, but will be compelled to attempt an offensive on either side, where the new line rejoins the old, that is, in Flanders and on the Aisne. He will thus attack my flanks, when I retire my centre, but by retiring my centre and devastating the ground before it I shall be safe from an attack there and can concentrate men and guns on my flanks and break the attacks of the foe."

This was exactly what happened. The retreat to the Hindenburg line ended the fighting between Arras and the Soissons region for the year. Haig made a brief effort in front of Arras, which coincided with Nivelle's Aisne offensive. But Nivelle's attack was wrecked because the Germans were able to concentrate men and guns on this flank. A similar fate overtook Haig's main offensive of the summer and autumn in Flanders for the same reasons. Meantime Hindenburg disposed of his Eastern difficulties for the time being and was prepared to resume the Western battle this spring.

#### Ludendorff Will Abandon Offensive

Now, it must be clear that Ludendorff can, if he chooses, imitate the Hindenburg strategy. He can retire to the Hindenburg line, and any serious attack upon it this year will be out of the question, because it will be impossible for the Allies to construct railroads and highways across the Picardy desert in time for any serious attack before the end of the campaigning season. They will be left with the alternative of attacking in Flanders and in Champagne, but the Germans will be able once more to concentrate all their reserves on their flanks and, by reason of their early gains this year, their positions on both flanks are far better than they were in 1917.

It is clear that if Ludendorff decides to retreat he abandons the offensive for the campaign and for the war. Unlike Hindenburg in 1917, he can have no hope of renewing the attack after a delay. There will be no new accession of troops for the West such as the collapse of Russia provided. Once on the defensive, the Germans can have no other chance of winning the war than a long, costly and terribly burdensome defensive. But it must be already plain that this is about all that is left for them in any case and that they may imperil the chances of defensive warfare if they stay too long in positions which are valuable only as points of departure for an attack which they can no longer expect to make.

#### A Refusal of Battle

A German retreat, then, will be a deliberate refusal of battle, a formal and unmistakable resignation of the offensive, a return to Hindenburg's strategy of 1917, with the realization that it is a retreat without hope of a later return to the offensive. The German will abandon a strategy which is based upon an effort to obtain a decision by one terrific campaign in favor of a strategy which seeks to avoid defeat by prolonging the war until exhaustion compels all of the combatants to stop, and William II, like

## THE THREE SOMME FRONTS



Louis XIV, will be left in possession of certain conquered provinces of his foes.

In the spring the German undertook to obtain an unlimited victory, a German peace on all fronts, with the domination of Europe as the natural consequence of the victory he sought. That victory has escaped him. He has used up his human material, and both in numbers and in quality of troops the advantage is possessed by his foe at the present moment and will rapidly increase. But he can, by a retirement which will not surrender territory of any importance, avoid a possible disaster this year, stave off the full development of Foch's offensive until next year and employ the time gained in endeavoring to win the war by a peace offensive which will leave him some profit.

#### Decisive Battle Adjourned

A retirement to the Hindenburg line will be a manoeuvre not without grave consequences for our allies. It will probably adjourn a decisive battle until next year; it will probably balk Foch's plans for an upward thrust between Arras and Soissons, indeed, between Ypres and Rheims, for the present year, but it will be a final surrender of the offensive and an ultimate confession that military victory is no longer possible for the German and that his sole hope is to hold out until exhaustion brings peace, and a peace which leaves him some part of his stealings.

It is worth recognizing, too, that next year the German can, if he chooses, repeat the Hindenburg retirement in France and in Belgium, withdrawing, for example, to the line of the Scheldt and the Meuse. But this will be of less advantage next year, when a vast American army will be able to try the offensive between Verdun and the Vosges. The Lorraine offensive is little understood in this country. It is impossible for our allies as long as the mass of the German troops are in Northern France and the Allies are unable to do more than match these German numbers. It is equally impossible for the Germans. But when we arrive with our great army it will be possible for us to undertake the same manoeuvre Castelnau and Pau undertook in August, 1914, and there will be no chance of a German counter-

blow in front of Paris as in the earlier time.

It is impossible to undertake an offensive from Nancy when the German will be able to undertake with superior numbers an offensive from Noyon, barely fifty miles from Paris. When America is ready the German will have to abandon his Paris menace, because he will himself be threatened in his home territory. But for the present year the threat will hardly be grave. He can, if he chooses, refuse battle and retreat to the old Hindenburg line, from which he can manoeuvre, not with his troops but with his statesmen, seeking not a German peace but a peace which will leave the military leadership in Germany, with a chance to claim that the present war of aggression has added provinces as has each Prussian war with few exceptions since Frederick the Great tore up that other scrap of paper, the Pragmatic Sanction, and stole Silesia from Maria Theresa a century and a half ago.

The present is perhaps a good time to pass in review the history of offensive warfare in the current struggle. All the great nations were surprised in a measure—and in a very large measure—by the sudden arrival of stagnation and trenches in 1914. Certain observers in each of the various armies had foreseen something of what would happen, but none had made his voice heard and no general staff had prepared to meet the situation.

Between the close of the campaign of 1914, with the termination of the First Battle of Ypres, and the Battle of Cambrai, three years later, offensive warfare was never able to pass beyond the second of what may be called the four stages in warfare of positions: those of preparation, attack, pursuit and march of approach.

The object lessons which might have served in each instance were not recognized. All through this period a growing tendency was manifest toward concentration of artillery and of material upon the preparation, at the sacrifice of the element of surprise, which alone could make possible a considerable victory, bringing with it a pursuit and for the moment only, and within very restricted limits, a return to the old continued war of movement.

#### Successful Surprises

All through this period there continued to be a belief that one successful attack followed by a great break through would lead to a return of the war of movement of the Napoleonic sort and the end of the war of positions. Look-

ing backward, we can see the process of development.

Three times on the Allied side in three campaigns the German was surprised, and there was a penetration of his lines which might have been followed by a pursuit had the opportunity been grasped. At Neuve Chapelle, in February, 1915, the road to Lille was open for hours. In Artois, three months later, the French opened a gap in the German lines which might have been used to necessitate a complete rearrangement of the German front between the Oise and the sea. A year later at the Somme a similar success attended the first French attack of July 1.

#### Cambrai and Its Lesson

On the German side the gas attack of 1915 temporarily laid the road open to Ypres, but in all four cases the chance was missed. By contrast in Champagne in September, 1915, and Verdun, February, 1916, at the Somme in the British operation of July and in the French campaign on the Aisne in 1917, the surprise was not sufficient to disorganize the whole system of defence before reserves could intervene, and an effort on the part of the assailant to institute a pursuit after only a partial reduction of the enemy's line led to colossal casualties and ultimate failure.

It was not until the tank attack at Cambrai, 1917, that the element of surprise was even temporarily made use of. Up to this time both sides had been multiplying their artillery preparations, with ever lengthening periods of bombardment, which served as an advertisement to the enemy of the direction in which the attack was coming and gave him the opportunity to prepare line after line behind his front. But at Cambrai there was only a brief artillery preparation; the tanks went in and cleared the wire entanglements, and the British troops had before them a seven-mile gap through which, had reserves been available, they might have advanced to Cambrai.

The chance was lost. But the lesson remained. The Germans were the first to apply it. Tried first on the Russian front above Riga, with the tanks left out, but with a brief intensive bombardment, it brought immediate success. Tried again on a very wide front in Picardy on March 21, it produced the greatest single success in line breaking on the Western front. The British line was broken on a front of forty miles. The defending army was so disorganized that it was incapable of defending supported positions until reserves could intervene and the German advance became a true pursuit over more than thirty miles of undefended country.

Here at last, and for the first time on

Decisive Battle Will Be Adjourned to  
1919 by Manoeuvre—War of Move-  
ment Not Reached and Napo-  
leonic Strokes Unlikely—Road  
to Berlin Is Long

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the West front, there seemed to be the possibility of a return to open warfare, to the warfare of movement of the older days. Evidently the Allies feared it. And yet within a period of a week the German wave was halted before new positions. The old war movement was over and trench warfare was on again.

The reason was obvious. German pursuit had outrun heavy artillery and even light artillery. It had outrun its provisions, while the Allied commanders were able to provide reserves and artillery in a new position, and against this position, hastily improvised as it was, the German infantry, unsupported by artillery, could not make progress.

Here, then, it would seem, was a final answer to the theory that the war of positions was a temporary stage. There had been preparation and attack, and, for the first time, pursuit, but at the end there had been a resumption of the earlier situation, new positions, new stagnation, and the attempts of the Germans to break down the new positions were so costly they had soon to be abandoned.

#### War of Movement Not Reached

The same thing happened on a smaller scale in the Flanders offensive in April. It happened again on a larger scale on the Aisne in the German attack on May 22. In all three the element of surprise was present; the Allied lines were broken, completely broken, on a considerable front. There was a pursuit, but the pursuit presently hurled itself against new positions and had to be abandoned.

Turning now to the history of the recent Allied operations, we see two further examples of an enemy taken by surprise, of immediate and rapid pursuit after successful attack and a termination of this pursuit before new positions in a brief period of time. At the Somme General Rawlinson's troops broke the German line southwest of Amiens on a front of ten miles and advanced a dozen miles, only to come in contact with the Germans rallying in new positions and to face a restored front. The victors harvested great profits and unmistakable gains, but in no sense restored the war of movement.

It seems to me manifest from the progress of the campaign of 1918 that we are not yet sensibly nearer to a return to the old style of warfare than we were before. It is impossible, given the extent of the front between the Channel and the Swiss border, to achieve a superiority of numbers on the whole front sufficient to organize an offensive calculated to overwhelm the Germans or upset the equilibrium of the whole front. Hutier's penetration in March was the greatest in width and it was only forty miles. In making this forty-mile gap, and exploiting it, upward of a million men were used. A similar attempt on the whole front would require not less than ten million shock troops—a thing neither side will ever have. On the other hand, it is quite clear that by breaking the line on a considerable front at one point a dislocation will be produced on both sides of the break. Thus the Germans had to leave the Marne following Mangin's attack at Soissons. They had to evacuate the Montdidier salient when Rawlinson advanced from Amiens along the Roye road. It is easy to see by looking at the map that a successful drive eastward from Ypres would compel an evacuation of the Belgian coast, while a drive northward between Verdun and Rheims might compel a withdrawal of the Germans behind the Meuse. Successive dislocations following successive blows are what we have to expect as we pass more and more to the grand offensive against the Germans.

#### Napoleonic Strokes Unlikely

But if the German is driven from the coast of Flanders he will presently be found standing on the line of the Scheldt. If he is driven from Champagne he will be found in position behind the Meuse. The whole country behind him is cut and seamed with switch lines and cross lines, constituting alternative positions. No single blow that one can now forecast can be more than a thrust which compels the evacuation of one line for another. There will be a flight and a pursuit between the two, with the capture of prisoners and material, but in each case the victor will presently encounter the vanquished in a new position and have to begin all over again.

I dwell upon these rather dull de-

tails because it seems to me there ought to be a more general understanding of what is to be expected in the immediate future. The possibility of great captures of armies or a return to war of the Napoleonic sort is slight. Our enemy has too many reserves, too many prepared positions behind his present front, to be in danger of disaster this year, and probably next—disaster of the sort that France suffered in the opening weeks of 1870 and Prussia at Jena in 1806.

#### Allies Will Retain Offensive

We have the offensive. We shall, in all human probability, retain it until the end of the war. When our American army is ready all three of the Allied armies will be able to deliver simultaneous thrusts on their own fronts. Before that day the German will inevitably retire at least behind the Meuse and the Scheldt, possibly to his own frontier, shortening and also improving his position. Until that day comes we shall continue to deal local blows, harvest local profits, but it will always be possible by reference to the map to calculate pretty accurately the possible extent of any single success.

Just now Foch has in two operations taken advantage of wholly vicious positions into which the Germans had put themselves as preliminaries to their grand offensives, now adjourned without date. He has taken his profit from German mistakes and from the accidental weakness of German positions which were not intended to be defensive positions at all. A much more serious problem will be before us when the German is at last in his true defensive position.

#### No Sudden Sweep To the Rhine

Since the element of surprise has returned, it is safe to foresee that we shall be able to turn him out of that position. But each time we shall find him in new positions, until one of two things happens—either his man power fails or the military spirit of his army is destroyed. In either case we shall then return to the old-fashioned war of movement, but it will be after the victory has been achieved and an uninterrupted march on Berlin is before us.

It is worth while to think for a moment of the long months when Grant and Lee stood facing each other in long trenches about Petersburg, south of Appomattox. There one had a real forecast of the war to-day, and the appointments of 1864 are likely to return in 1918, and even in 1919, if one expects too much in a brief period of time. There is to be no sudden transition, no sudden sweep to the Rhine and beyond the Rhine; we have got to batter the German out of one position after another—out of the Hindenburg line, the line of the Scheldt and the Meuse, the line of the Ardennes, the Moselle and the Vosges—before we approach the line of the Rhine, which is strongest of all, and behind that we may expect other lines, while between each series of positions there will be intermediate defensive positions.

I do not believe the German defence will endure through successive defeats. Obviously the morale will break down, and in the presence of inevitable defeat on the military side the statesmen will endeavor, even at a huge price, to avoid the fatal consequences of invasion and ravage. But it is essential now to recognize that we are only putting our feet on the first stretch of the road to Berlin.

We are going to pass through period after period of attack, pursuit and approach to new positions, with new stagnation. It is more essential than ever before that soldiers should be trained in all the lessons of contemporary warfare. Neglect of these lessons now will bring the most terrible burden of casualties upon our young American army. The belief that the war of position is over and the Napoleonic warfare of movement restored will mean the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of Americans unnecessarily. We are certain of victory now, but we have still to regulate the price in human life to be paid for victory, and we can regulate it only by multiplying the instruction based upon four years of experience in the warfare of position, in the only kind of warfare possible to-day or likely to be possible in any future that can now be foreseen.